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Death on the US-Mexico Border: Performance, Immigration Politics, and José Casas's *14*

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ABSTRACT Jimmy Noriega looks to theatrical performance as a method for engaging the subject of "illegal" immigration and, in particular, the death of undocumented migrants. He argues that theatre can provide an avenue by which to generate both a private and public discourse that allows for a more nuanced and fair treatment of migrant death, which is especially significant in comparison to the representations offered by the typical media coverage. Rather than focus on several texts, this essay analyzes one play—*14* by José Casas (2003)—and the ways it engages with mass migrant death and the myriad of responses to it.

"14 Illegal Immigrants Found Dead in Arizona"—*CNN*¹

"14 Illegal Immigrants Die in Desert"—*The Washington Post*²

As the two news articles above detail, on May 24, 2001, the bodies of fourteen undocumented immigrants were found near Yuma, Arizona, five days after their smugglers abandoned them. In addition, eleven survivors were hospitalized for dehydration and illness brought on by the severe desert heat, which reached temperatures as high as 115 degrees. *The Washington Post* reports, "The 14 immigrants who succumbed to exposure made up the largest group of border crossers to die in Arizona in more than 20 years."³ The death of these fourteen individuals garnered widespread media attention and renewed the national dispute over immigration. The reactions to the deaths varied from sympathy for the immigrants to anger at the increasing number of undocumented people entering the US through the Mexican border. Though migrant death is common in this region, the news of mass death triggered a more robust response from both sides of the debate.

As expected, the news headlines reported the event as a grave incident of abuse and violence inflicted onto immigrant bodies. However, the subtle yet more significant detail of these stories is that the subjects of the news reports remained nameless: the facts, told as tragedy, still managed to erase the individuals from the story. Throughout the media accounts, the words "aliens," "illegals," and "bodies" were used to describe the people involved in the mass death, yet at no time was a single person named or identified. Collapsed into generalized and indistinguishable categories, these individuals were framed only as corpses, stripped of a human identity and re-signified as statistics. In this way, migrant death becomes unrecognizable—in fact, *alien* and *other*—to the consumers of US news agencies. Reduced to numbers, the bodies of Latin Americans who die crossing the border into the US have become increasingly commodified and normalized in the international crisis of undocumented immigration in the fifteen years since these events.

In this essay, I am interested in performances that tackle the subject of "illegal" immigration and, in particular, the death of undocumented migrants. It is my claim that the

theatre of immigration needs to be interpreted within the larger framework of protest/activism that seeks justice for those who exist outside the US legal system. Performance can work to (re)present the deaths of migrants but, more importantly, it can shed light onto the public reactions to these tragedies. In this way, theatre also becomes a site of self-reflexivity, asking audience members to critically examine their own opinions and biases as they witness these stories unfold. It is the spectators' ability to watch characters perform a multivocal response to the immigration debate that remains essential to the efficacy of theatre for social change within this context. For this reason, I argue that theatre can provide an avenue by which to generate both a private and public discourse that allows for a more nuanced and fair treatment of migrant death, which is especially significant in comparison to the representations offered by the typical media coverage. Theatre, therefore, makes a contribution to leveraging justice against the large-scale cyclical crisis of migrant death, which is fueled by the forces of immigration politics, labor, capital, racism, and national borders (to name a few).

In *Performance, Identity, and Immigration Law: A Theatre of Undocumentedness*, Gad Guterman offers a distinct perspective into the ways that theatrical plays about immigration work within and against the US legal structure. He offers the term "undocumentedness" as a way of reframing the conversation on illegal immigration. He says, "Undocumentedness moves us away from an adjective that dangerously describes people to a noun that describes circumstances under which people must live. These circumstances often create specific stresses and contradictions that inevitably shape an individual's sense of self and community."⁴ This strategy rejects those traditionally accepted markers ("undocumented," "illegal") that perpetuate a power dynamic grounded in marginalization and exploitation of the immigrant body. As useful as it is, however, undocumentedness cannot be employed as a lens to restructure our understanding of those who die in the act of crossing; the term cannot apply to migrant death precisely because it focuses attention on the social and legal structures that affect people in everyday *life*. Death, as a marker, erases the immigrant from the living world and, in a similar vein to news headlines and statistics, does not allow for agency in the way the deceased are portrayed or remembered. In fact—precisely because nothing can be done to reverse death—justice for migrants who die as they cross into the US is a complete impossibility within this failed system. We can alter the conditions that cause migrant death, but the beneficiaries of that reform belong to the future; the possibility for progressive change only applies to those who are *alive*. The limits of migrant death (and how we react to it) are premised on the fact that we cannot speak about the dead without implicating or invoking the living.

It seems, then, that there is an inherent failure in the ability of activism to intercede on behalf of those who are affected by the gravest of injustices—death. So how can theatre work to portray the stories of dead immigrants while operating within this limited system of social change? And how can performance attempt to secure justice for those who have already perished under unjust circumstances? First, we must admit the failure of these performances to rectify or reverse the injustice at hand. Only then can we begin to understand the role that the deceased play in the larger framework of activism and political reorganization. Next, we must accept that the living use and manipulate the bodies of the dead in their agendas for and against social change. In many ways, the drive to stop death emerges from and finds its power in death itself.

With this in mind, I contend that theatre can work in dialogue with activists seeking reform as a way of *preventing* further violence and death, while at the same time acknowledging that these public performances readily use victimhood and the bodies/stories of the dead as a way of instigating a call to action. The theatre of migrant

death is similar to what Robert Skloot calls “the theatre of genocide.”⁵ Both portray mass death on stage in an effort to reinsert the deceased into public memory, as well as to educate audiences in an attempt to prevent future loss. Skloot says,

The theatre in particular possesses the capacity to assist in raising awareness of the scourge of genocide and in engaging emotional responses that can both offer images that provoke empathy for people whose lives are vulnerable and endangered and bring audiences closer to understanding the historical and cultural forces that create the lethal condition for mass murder.⁶

Similarly, a number of US theatre artists have responded to migrant death by creating plays that ask their audiences to identify with immigrant subjects and to witness representations of and responses to their deaths.⁷ This is especially important because immigrant death is too easily forgotten, ignored, and/or erased in the national consciousness. Performance, even though temporary, claims a public space for the invisible and deceased. It also, however, remains implicated in the political economy of representation and identity politics. Even more so, the theatre of immigration looks different depending on the positionality of the author: Mexican plays treat the subject very differently than those written in the US, just as US Latina/o playwrights create very different interpretations than their non-Latina/o counterparts.

With these differences in mind, rather than focus on several texts, this essay analyzes one play— *14* by José Casas (2003)—and the ways it engages with mass migrant death and the myriad of responses to it. Casas, who has won several awards for his writing, is a self-identified Chicano playwright, and his work has been staged across the Southwest. In his book *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre*, Johnny Saldaña calls Casas, “one of the nation’s most exciting new Latino voices in theatre.”⁸ Casas based the play on interviews he conducted with different people around Arizona, including residents of Yuma, Phoenix, Flagstaff, Sedona, Guadalupe, Chandler, Goodyear, Scottsdale, Douglas, Tucson, Tempe, and Mesa. Teatro Bravo in Phoenix first staged *14* in September 2003. It later became a 2004 finalist for the Nuestras Voces National Playwriting Competition and has since had more than twenty productions in a number of venues, including: East LA Rep, Hillbarn Theatre, Gilbert-Chandler Community College, and Breath of Fire Latina Theater Ensemble.

The play is comprised of a series of monologues, framed as interviews with Casas as character, that take as a departure point the passing of the fourteen immigrants in Yuma. Casas chose not to create characters for the deceased, but instead to allow the topic of their deaths to be the impetus for the play’s storyline. *14* opens with a series of projections that read:

may 19, 2001
a smuggling guide abandons more
than 30 mexicans crossing
east of yuma.
dehydration kills 14.
their deaths trigger renewed
binational debate over immigration.
the dead are:
lorenzo hernandez ortiz

raymundo barreda landa,
reynaldo bartolo,
ario castillo fernandez,
enrique landero,
raymundo barreda maruri,
julian mabros malaga,
claudio marin alejandro,
arnulfo flores badilla,
edgar adrian martinez colorado,
efrain gonzalez manzano,
heriberto tapia baldillo.
two others have yet
to be identified⁹

The first projections, reminiscent of the news headlines announcing deaths of undocumented immigrants, focus on the facts. Individual slides with each of the victims' names, however, follow. The slides, projected onto the dark stage and with pauses between each, allow the audience time to absorb and react to the list of names, something rarely provided in the news stories. This use of individual names departs from the scenario of immigrant deaths as nameless tragedy. Rather, each slide recasts the deceased bodies from group to individual, invisible to visible. Even the final slide, listing two unidentified individuals, allows the victims a moment and space within the public sphere.

After this somber opening, which functions as both a pedagogical moment and a form of memorialization, the actors enter onto the stage. Throughout the production, four performers portray the polyvocal responses from the interviewees: a rancher, artist, senator, cashier, actor, magazine editor, law student, nanny, ER doctor, soldier, kindergarten teacher, pastor, and immigrant day laborer. These "characters" are based on the real-life interviews conducted by the playwright. As Casas explains, "Every scene is based/fictionalized on actual interviews and the people that I interviewed. In terms of the dialogue, I would say that 75% of it was the actual interviews being incorporated into the text."¹⁰ Through this approach, Casas was able to craft a documentary-like portrayal of the inhabitants of the borderlands. Their living voices stand in stark contrast to the bodiless names that could only be presented through written form at the beginning of the play. In this way, the living and the dead are separated not just in life, but also in staged representation.

¹⁴ builds upon this difference as it presents a number of individuals who live in the contested and complicated border zone. In the groundbreaking *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestizaje*, Gloria Anzaldúa draws attention to the many nameless and faceless people who have been caught up in the violence of the US-Mexico border, what she calls "*una herida abierta*" (an open wound).¹¹ According to Anzaldúa, the pain brought upon the inhabitants of the borderlands is caused by division and separation: "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*....The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants."¹² For Anzaldúa, the demarcation of the border exists as a way of protecting the gringos¹³ from those she refers to as "*los atravesados*."¹⁴ Understood from the US perspective, the border becomes the physical

barrier between the “first world” and the “other” nations of Latin America. This us/them dichotomy (“us” being the North/US, “them” being the South/Latin America) transforms those who attempt to cross the border regions of Mexico into the US into others and aliens, people *not like us*. These constructions strip the individual of identity and humanity: no longer a subject, the immigrant body in the act of crossing becomes an object of contestation, fear, and disgust.

Throughout the play, *14* captures these glaring differences, presenting a regional identity that is fractured and divided not just by citizenship, but also by race. The characters must make a conscious decision to identify with or separate themselves from the dead migrants, which provides the audience with an even more complicated perspective into the immigration debate. Even more so, the characters in the play are both Latina/o and non-Latina/o. Adding to this distinction is the playwright’s requirement that the casting must include: “one white actress, one latina, one white actor, one latino.”¹⁵ The physical requirement of racial difference onstage demands that the audience acknowledge and reflect upon the actors’ bodies and race throughout the production. But as Casas demonstrates throughout *14*, the opinions and reactions of the characters to the issues of race and undocumented immigration are not always aligned with the color of their skin. Some Latina/o characters, like Omar Castillo and Matthew Logan, do not affiliate themselves with the immigrants, even though many would expect them to because of their shared ethnic identities. Instead, these characters go out of their way to separate themselves entirely from the immigrants, as well as to demonstrate their assimilation into the US cultural system as evidence of their superiority. As a result, the interviews about migrant death instead become about personal identity and self-promotion.

The character Castillo, an Arizona State Senator, uses his moment on stage as a way of justifying his position against bilingual education. His statements reflect the misconception that immigrants take advantage of social service programs and welfare, and that their presence in the state is an economic burden on the taxpayers. In his monologue he argues that it is not the responsibility of the education system to carry the burden of the immigrant children who attend Arizona’s schools. “[T]he Hispanic community needs to rely less on the kindness of others” is his assessment of the situation in Arizona.¹⁶ When accused of being anti-Latina/o, he responds, “i’m anything, but that.”¹⁷ He then continues to justify his political position by telling his own personal story: the son of a Latina housekeeper, he used to accompany his mother to work as a child. He attributes his mastery of the English language to the fact that he used to watch television as his mother worked. In this way, he distances himself from any possible connection to the lives or deaths of immigrant people, instead focusing on his own story of personal success.



Juan Enrique Carrillo as Omar Castillo in the Breath of Fire Latina Theater Ensemble production of *14* (March 2008). Photo credit: Karyn Lawrence.

The other character in the play who distances himself from his Latino identity is Matthew Logan. A native of Phoenix, Logan makes a living as an actor in Los Angeles. When asked about his decision to change his name from Mateo Sanchez to Matthew Logan, he responds, “same difference? it’s only a name; not who i am.”¹⁸ For him, the choice to discard his Latino identity for a more generic and malleable one is easy. But this troubles Casas, who up until this point has remained neutral. Throughout the play, the person being interviewed is speaking to Casas, who does not talk but still maintains a presence. In the scene with Logan, Casas’s position as interviewer/playwright takes on a more substantial role as Logan responds to interjections by the playwright. Logan retorts, “my cousin warned me about you. she told me you were one of those chicano power militant types.”¹⁹ Logan, as a Latino defending his choice to assimilate, objects to Casas by asserting, “i don’t see any reason to feel guilty. why should i? i didn’t grow up with visions of becoming a revolutionary. all i ever wanted to do was act. it’s that simple. the way i go about accomplishing this....is my business.”²⁰

Logan stands up to Casas as he defends his actions as a political choice, claiming that, “i do shakespeare because it challenges me. chekov. ibsen. i love them and i don’t want anyone to tell me i can’t do those plays because of my ethnicity.”²¹ For Logan, the choice not to be Latino in the theatre business is what allows him the opportunity to continue to do what he loves. Casas, a playwright and fellow theatre practitioner, however, has dedicated his work to the Chicana/o cause. Faced with a “white-washed” counterpart, Casas is challenged from within his own affinity group (not only ethnically, but also artistically).

Logan, responding to a question from Casas, says, "luis valdez? ooh, how did i not see that coming? no...i've never done any of his work...sorry to disappoint you, but i can't say it bothers me very much either."²² This meeting of the two sides of the politically/artistically informed male Latino identity spectrum—the militant Chicano and the assimilated Latino—ends in a draw and the interview scene concludes.

The mention of Luis Valdez in the play, although dismissed by Logan, reminds the audience that *14* comes from a tradition that, as Jorge Huerta notes, "was born of and remains a people's theater."²³ Casas's identification with Valdez situates him within a genealogy that developed from the politically charged *actos* of El Teatro Campesino. For Casas and Valdez, Chicano theatre *is* revolutionary theatre: its primary goal is to stage the voices, stories, and struggles of its people. And as Huerta reminds us, "If the politically active Chicano is the hero, the apolitical Mexican American is the villain."²⁴ Within the plays of Valdez, this antihero/villain was represented by the *vendido* (the sellout). Betraying his culture and people in the name of self-interest, the *vendido* is one of the most dangerous figures in the Latina/o fight for justice. In *14*, both Castillo and Logan embody this dangerous traitor: they offer an anti-immigrant and anti-Latina/o perspective that threatens the community from the inside. And when it comes to migrant suffering and death, this apathetic and even hostile reaction exacerbates the problem. For many, the question that emerges is: why should anyone care about migrant deaths if not even Latina/os care about them?

The opinions of the non-Latina/o characters in the play also offer a variety of perspectives. Although race seems to be the obvious factor determining the attitudes of those being interviewed, most of the non-Latina/o citizens do not see race as a central concern. For example, Lacey Williams, a white local businesswoman from Scottsdale, says, "it isn't a question of race. it's a question of economics. arizona is already in a budget crunch as it is. add them. yes, that's right. them! the immigrants you were talking about. add them to the equation and you'll see that the solution to the problem is nowhere in sight."²⁵ Employing the us/them divide in her language and reasoning, Williams continues to justify her views on immigration as a matter of economic security and comfort. Defining Scottsdale as "a community of like-minded people," Williams corrects herself by asserting, "we want our property values to remain high. we want our children to attend the best schools [...] we don't want what's happening to places like tucson and yuma to happen here. that wouldn't be acceptable."²⁶ For Williams, the importance of class superiority overwhelms the possibility of migrant justice. She lists the luxuries in her town—expensive hotels, restaurants, spas, golf courses—and is quick to reassure the audience that she is not racist:

this isn't about me disliking mexicans or anything like that. i love the mexican culture. i practically live at baja fresh.²⁷ and...my nanny, rosa, is like a member of the family...and when i was a student at arizona state, my sorority sisters and i spent every spring break in mexico...my husband and i went there for our honeymoon so, you see, it's not about disliking another group of people. it's about the fact that there is not enough money to go around.²⁸

In her explanation, she reduces Mexican culture and its people to a restaurant, nanny, and vacations in Mexico, demonstrating that she is unable to comprehend the larger framework of economic disadvantage and racism. She then indicates and expresses concern that the needs of her community are being neglected because of immigrants: "is it wrong to believe our citizens should have the first right to the amenities entitled to us as taxpayers? education, social services, etc. is it fair that some foreigner has access to our resources?"²⁹ Although studies have shown that immigrants are less likely than native-

born citizens to use public services, Williams maintains that the immigrant is at fault for the economic decline of the state.³⁰



Elsa Martinez Phillips as Lacey Williams in the Breath of Fire Latina Theater Ensemble production of *14* (March 2008). Photo credit: Karyn Lawrence.

These kinds of misconceptions, fueled by anti-immigrant rhetoric, become the basis for much of the animosity toward the immigrant and allow for a dehumanization of migrant death. Even though many citizens and politicians claim to act on behalf of immigrants, the legal and social structures at play prevent any significant changes from taking effect. As this monologue demonstrates, it is belonging and exclusion that become central to any discussion of immigration. Even in death, which one would assume should produce some form of sympathy, the migrants cannot escape the limits of an exclusionary discourse based on hatred and disdain for otherness. As a nation, the foci of these types of tragedies quickly turn into debates on border security, citizenship, and economic and social identity. These words and actions emerge from a desire to define and control foreign bodies through a pathologization steeped in concepts of transgression and illegality. In the end, blame is always placed onto the immigrants.

When Williams turns the conversation to the weather, she claims that it helps make Scottsdale the perfect place to live. She says, “i can’t say i have an answer for the heat, but that’s what air conditioners and pools were made for and, really...a little heat never hurt anybody.”³¹ But when Casas interjects, bringing the conversation back to the death of the immigrants in the desert, she answers, “yes, yes, the fourteen immigrants. simple. they should’ve brought along some more water.”³² Incredibly, Williams blames the immigrants for their own demise, simplifying the issue and exhibiting not only ignorance, but a lack of

sorrow for their death. Reacting to the interviewer's fury as he writes in his notebook, Williams is offended and says, "unlike you, i try to look at people as people...and, not race. nothing i've told you today has anything to do with that. it's about maintaining standards. there's no sin in that."³³

This need to protect "standards" and property becomes the main justification for those who oppose immigration reform. In a scene entitled "a man's home," Casas interviews Charlie Clarkson, a rancher from Douglas who is the leader of a group known as Voices for a Free Arizona, a consortium of ranchers who actively combat immigration along the border zone. In addition to the many natural dangers that they face as they cross the desert, migrants also face vigilantism which this group represents. With the continued attention of border-patrolling white supremacist groups like the Minutemen, the Ku Klux Klan, and other militia organizations, undocumented immigrants go from hunting out a better living in the United States to actually *being the hunted*. With this type of Anglo-nativism on the rise, new breeds of US citizens are being generated and dispersed along the borderlands: armed with patriotism, the security of citizenship, and Second Amendment gun rights, these volunteers patrol the desert in search of immigrants. Similar in style to what Ghassan Hage calls the "white-and-very-worried-about-the-nation-subject," these vigilantes act according to a "White nation fantasy."³⁴ Hage defines this as, "a fantasy of a nation governed by White people, a fantasy of White supremacy."³⁵ The immigrants, or more specifically the racialized immigrant bodies, represent the threat to this fantasy. In his scenario, Hage presents a society governed by a "nationalist practice of exclusion,"³⁶ where non-Anglos become "objects to be governed."³⁷

This governing takes on many forms, but most important to this essay is the fact that the US government has been able to militarize the US-Mexico border through armed force with a doctrine that Timothy Dunn calls "low intensity conflict."³⁸ Dunn includes in this description: "military surveillance equipped by police agencies," including AHIS Cobra helicopter gunships, OC-85Cs reconnaissance helicopters, small airplanes with TV cameras and forward-looking infrared night-vision sensors, and a variety of seismic, magnetic, and acoustic sensors to detect movement, heat, and sound, all in addition to the chain link and industrial fencing set up along the border.³⁹ This militarization—in other words, a *war on undocumented immigrants*—advocates for a greater us/them divide. We belong here and they do not.

In an atmosphere of militarization, where the only goal is to stop border crossings, the death of individuals becomes nothing more than collateral damage. Another character in *14*, Clarkson, plays with a small airplane drone as he explains the need for a military approach to undocumented immigration. He says, "we need all the help we can get. times are changing. america is under siege. the world isn't a safe place anymore."⁴⁰ He continues, "if we don't protect ourselves, no one else will."⁴¹ As the interview continues, and as Casas brings up the subject of the fourteen deceased immigrants, Clarkson responds, "it's a shame what happened to those people. but, those are the chances you take, you know?"⁴² As he continues to speak about immigrants, he shows a brief moment of understanding, stating: "of course, i know why they come! i know they got families like me... that they want to make a living. feed their children."⁴³ But even this moment of clarity becomes obscured as he adds, "but who's to say that one of the people crossing isn't one of those drug dealers or terrorist fellas."⁴⁴ As able as he is to cognitively understand the reasons that immigrants cross illegally into the US, he is unable to empathize with them and instead bases his opinions on a fear-based rhetoric that labels immigrants as potential drug dealers and terrorists. This "othering" effect allows him to maintain a distance that prevents a humane perspective into the immigrant plight.

In the play, the Reverend Clay Nash stands in clear juxtaposition to Clarkson. In an interview that takes place in the desert outskirts of Tucson, just two hours north of the Mexican border, Nash explains why the immigrants are risking their lives to cross the dangerous desert: “immigration is changing their policies; rerouting immigrants so that they have to travel the most treacherous geography you can imagine...now these poor folk are being forced to travel to god knows where...only to die...not to be apprehended. the powers that be know that all too well.”⁴⁵ When Operation Gatekeeper and Operation Blockade went into effect in the 1990s, the U.S. government’s goal was to stop illegal immigration coming in from the large urban centers of El Paso/Ciudad Juárez and San Diego/Tijuana.⁴⁶ The results were successful, with a reduction in the numbers of undocumented immigrants crossing into the US via these entry points. However, there was a “funnel effect” that resulted in a change of migratory patterns that made the Arizona desert the alternate route for entry North.⁴⁷ As traditional, less dangerous entry points were sealed, immigrants had to find alternate routes that were often more dangerous and carried a greater risk of death. A February 2010 *Los Angeles Times* article states, “some 6,000 people have died crossing the Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California borders with Mexico since 1994, according to human-rights groups. About 500 more die every year.”⁴⁸

Reverend Nash, during his interview with Casas, is filling up a water station for use by immigrants. Nash’s activities, as well as those of other human rights groups, are under attack by many US citizens. As he explains:

what irritates me are those people who criticize what we’re doing...saying that we are not only contributing, but encouraging illegal immigration...and i use the word, illegal, loosely. that word should be reserved for those who are truly breaking the law...rapists...murderers...that isn’t the case here. the only thing these people are about is survival.⁴⁹

Reflecting on the death of the Yuma fourteen, he continues, “it boggles my mind to see how desensitized civilization has become...the sight of fourteen deceased bodies on a dried up riverbed and the only thoughts that pass through their hollow mind is ‘we got to do something about illegal immigration. it’s getting out of hand.’”⁵⁰ Nash’s words, as the final monologue in the play, stand against those spoken by Lacey Williams and Charlie Clarkson. Nash’s view of the crisis, truly seeing the deaths of the fourteen individuals as a tragedy, forces him to reflect on the humanitarian concerns of the immigration crisis. As citizens of Arizona rally against undocumented immigrants and as legislation passes that puts civil liberties in jeopardy, the simple answer offered by Nash is to see and focus on the human aspect of these immigrant deaths. In an educated and almost prophetic way, Nash offers a solution—or better yet, a new perspective—to the dispute over illegal immigration. He says, “we can no longer look at ourselves as two nations divided by a river or some fence. We have to look at ourselves as a region that’s going to live together, that’s going to work together, that’s going to make some damn progress together.”⁵¹ Invoking Anzaldúa’s image and metaphor of the “gran herida,” Nash identifies with the plight of those who are caught in the violence of the borderlands. As his scene comes to an end, Nash sees an immigrant and calls to him to offer some water—because of Nash this person does not become another faceless victim of the desert.



Daniel Penilla as Reverend Clay Nash in the Breath of Fire Latina Theater Ensemble production of *14* (March 2008). Photo credit: Karyn Lawrence.

As Nash well understands, for the thousands of Latin American immigrants entering the US illegally each year, this act of transfer and transformation—the crossing over—is a dangerous and deadly one. Fearing being trapped, arrested, and deported by US officials, these border crossers traverse the dangerous space of the border in search of better opportunities: the mythic American Dream. In the penultimate scene, an immigrant day laborer, Oscar García, offers the immigrant perspective on this journey and the risks involved in it. He speaks to Casas while looking for work in front of a Home Depot in Mesa. The monologue, entitled “muñeca,” is delivered in Spanish.⁵² García begins by telling Casas that he knew one of the fourteen victims that died in Yuma. He says, “there’s always a chance we won’t make it. that shit is fucked-up, but there is no other way. mexico is a poor country, like its people.”⁵³ Having previously taken the journey, García acknowledges that the immigrants face the dangers knowingly. His insistence that “there is no other way” only highlights the necessity and desperation of the immigrants and explains why so many still cross when they know they can die.

García continues by speaking about his family in Mexico and the way that his money is helping them out. He explains that he wants to buy his daughter, Estrella, “a real christmas present and a real birthday present...one of those american barbie dolls.”⁵⁴ Calculating that the dolls, a doll house, and paying for shipping will cost him almost two hundred dollars, he shows determination to provide his daughter with the gifts, which ironically are a symbol of the American white and upper-class community. As the embodiment of the immigrant voice in the play, García tells Casas, “i work hard.”⁵⁵ Understanding his

interviewer's ability to speak on his behalf, he takes a moment to address the immigration debate and the opinions of those who mislabel and mistreat him and his fellow immigrants:

i don't steal or nothing like that. i am an honest man. it's not fair what people say about me and my friends. they treat us like we're animals and that's not true! they do not know how we feel...how much we miss our families. i love mexico, but there are no jobs in mexico. i am only doing what i have to do. i'm not hurting anybody. you make sure to tell people that. we are not criminals! criminals don't buy american barbie dolls.[56](#)

Challenging the dominant anti-immigrant rhetoric, García's monologue is the third, usually silenced, voice in the immigration debate. Opponents and supporters of immigrants—as citizens—get a voice in the media and in elections, but the undocumented immigrant voice is almost always ignored. Anti-immigrant citizens use the live body of undocumented immigrants in the US as evidence of a threat; pro-immigrant citizens use the dead body of the immigrant as evidence of a growing humanitarian disaster. In *14*, Casas allows the immigrant voice to be heard, in his/her native tongue, and for the immigrant body to be seen on his/her own terms and without a filter. In addition to García's monologue, *14* provides the audience with another Spanish monologue, "virgencita linda," delivered by an elderly woman, Luz Ortiz, who works as a hotel cleaning lady. By providing the immigrant voice from differing gendered and generational points of view, Casas presents a wider view of the immigrant perspective. It is important to note once again, however, that these responses can only come from the living; in death, migrants are marked by an erasure that prevents any form of agential public outcry.



April Ibarra performs the monologue "virgencita linda" in the Breath of Fire Latina Theater Ensemble production of *14* (March 2008). Photo credit: Karyn Lawrence.

Despite the efforts of playwrights such as Casas, the truth remains that no real justice can be offered to migrants who die as they trek the dangerous border zone into the United States in search of a better home and life. Very little can be done to prosecute or even prevent these types of crimes, especially when undocumented immigration negatively marks migrants as criminals. Theatre, nonetheless, provides counternarratives to the immigration debate by offering new perspectives on how to engage with death and migration. As David Román says, "Performances open up new critical possibilities for thinking about migration and exile, citizenship and belonging, and the cost for those who





traverse those borders and boundaries.”⁵⁷ In this way, theatre can be employed as one of the many efforts designed to help solve some of the problems caused by this debate over immigration and to prevent future injustices from taking place.

The playwrights physically recreating these stories on the stage are reminding audiences that the undocumented immigrant is alive and human, even when it is death that creates and propels the narrative. Theatre, as a form dependent on live bodies (both on the stage and in the audience), becomes a creative avenue through which to discuss death precisely because it is a live event. The audience, in turn, reciprocates through an active sense of “seeing”—in this case, that which is rendered invisible in the acts of crossing and dying. As Casas states, “Exploring the issue of immigration on stage is vital because it is another important entry point for dialogue as well as a space where different perspectives can be explored.” He continues, “Exploring death allows for a variety of stories, as well as creates a space for audience members to reflect on what it means to be human.”⁵⁸

Traditional theatre, like protest, can foster the conditions that work toward a progressive immigrant agenda: a public platform, energized performing bodies, an engaged audience, and a sense of *communitas*. Victor Turner, writing about *communitas*, describes it as an experience of unity that brings people together, but also “preserves individual distinctiveness.”⁵⁹ The sense of *communitas* engendered in performances dealing with the subject of immigration allows for people publicly marked as different to find a common ground, even if only momentarily. And as Jill Dolan notes in *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*, it is moments of shared intimacy that contain the potential to produce feelings of belonging and a sense of future hope. Commenting on the political potential created by audiences coming together, she notes that “such spectatorship might encourage them to be active in other public spheres, to participate in civic conversations that performance perhaps begins.”⁶⁰ It is moments like these that can lead to the much-needed change in the failed immigration system.

Theatre is a political arena where new dialogues can be scripted, imagined, and transferred to new audiences; it is a temporary yet vital space that is needed in this age of increased migration and death. By allowing people previously rendered invisible to become nationally—perhaps even internationally—visible, performance transforms the public into a space where seemingly ordinary citizens and actors can witness and speak out against social injustice. The potential of the theatre of immigration lies in its ability to work in tandem with those activists seeking reorganization as a way of preventing violence and death along the borderlands. While the debates surrounding the country—national identity, national borders, national security—continue to escalate, we must remember that it is migrant death that creates the impetus for a larger dialogue on legal, and humane, reform.

Notes

1. No author, “14 Illegal Immigrants Found Dead in Arizona,” *CNN*, May 24, 2001, accessed November 10, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/05/24/border.deaths/>. 
2. Giovanna Dell’orto, “14 Illegal Immigrants Die in Desert,” *The Washington Post*, May 24, 2001, accessed November 10, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/aponline/20010524/aponline090219_000.htm. 
3. Ibid. 
4. Gad Guterman, *Performance, Identity, and Immigration Law: A Theatre of Undocumentedness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2. 

5. Robert Skloot, *The Theatre of Genocide: Four Plays about Mass Murder in Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia, and Armenia* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 5. [↗](#)
6. *Ibid.*, 19. [↗](#)
7. A few examples include: Carlos Lacamara, *Nowhere on the Border*, in *Plays and Playwrights 2009*, ed. Martin Denton (New York: The New York Theatre Experience, 2009), 231–260; Kara Hartzler, *No Roosters in the Desert* (South Gate, CA: NoPassport Press, 2010); Mary Gallagher, *¿De Donde?* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1998); Silvia González S., *Boxcar/El Vagón*, in *Borders on Stage: Plays Produced by Teatro Bravo*, ed. Trino Sandoval (Phoenix: Lion & The Seagoat, 2008), 38–68. [↗](#)
8. Johnny Saldaña *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2005), 46. [↗](#)
9. José Casas, 14, in *Borders on Stage: Plays Produced by Teatro Bravo*, ed. Trino Sandoval (Phoenix: Lion & The Seagoat, 2008), 77. [↗](#)
10. José Casas, personal communication with the author, March 15, 2016. [↗](#)
11. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestizaje*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books), 25. [↗](#)
12. *Ibid.* [↗](#)
13. This is a Spanish term that is often meant to refer to a person, especially a US citizen, who is not Hispanic or Latina/o. [↗](#)
14. “Atravesados” can have two meanings. Literally, it can be translated as “the crossed.” But the negative connotation of the word, when used to refer to people, can also mean “those in the way.” [↗](#)
15. Casas, 14, 74. [↗](#)
16. *Ibid.*, 82. [↗](#)
17. *Ibid.* Casas does not use capital letters throughout the script. This is a stylistic trademark of his playwriting. [↗](#)
18. *Ibid.*, 92. [↗](#)
19. *Ibid.*, 91. [↗](#)
20. *Ibid.*, 92. [↗](#)
21. *Ibid.*, 93. [↗](#)
22. *Ibid.* [↗](#)
23. Jorge A. Huerta, *Chicano Theater: Themes and Forms*, (Ypsilanti, MI: Bilingual Press, 1982), 3. [↗](#)
24. *Ibid.*, 47. [↗](#)
25. Casas, “14,” 111. [↗](#)
26. *Ibid.*, 112. [↗](#)
27. Baja Fresh is a chain of Tex-Mex restaurants. [↗](#)
28. *Ibid.* [↗](#)
29. *Ibid.* [↗](#)
30. La Voz Nueva, “Immigration Misconceptions,” *La Voz Nueva* (Denver, CO), Aug 10, 2005. [↗](#)
31. Casas, “14,” 113. [↗](#)
32. *Ibid.* [↗](#)
33. *Ibid.*, 114. [↗](#)

34. Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 18. [↗](#)
35. Ibid. [↗](#)
36. Ibid., 47. [↗](#)
37. Ibid., 17. [↗](#)
38. Timothy Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978-1992: Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine Comes Home* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 148. [↗](#)
39. Ibid. [↗](#)
40. Casas, "14," 100. [↗](#)
41. Ibid., 101. [↗](#)
42. Ibid. [↗](#)
43. Ibid. [↗](#)
44. Ibid. [↗](#)
45. Ibid., 117. [↗](#)
46. For more information on Operation Gatekeeper see Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the "Illegal Alien" and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and for more information on Operation Blockade see Timothy J. Dunn, *Blockading the Border and Human Rights: The El Paso Operation that Remade Immigration Enforcement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). [↗](#)
47. Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith, M. Melissa McCormick, Daniel Martinez, Inez Magdalena Duarte, "The 'Funnel Effect' & Recovered Bodies of Unauthorized Migrants Processed by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, 1990-2005." Binational Migration Institute, Oct. 2006, accessed August 24, 2016, <http://bmi.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/The%20Funnel%20Effect%20and%20Recovered%20Bodies> [↗](#)
48. Hector Tobar, "A Complex Tragedy at the Border," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), February 21, 2010. [↗](#)
49. Casas, "14," 120. [↗](#)
50. Ibid. [↗](#)
51. Ibid. [↗](#)
52. Casas provides a translation of the two Spanish monologues with the script "as a courtesy," but he emphasizes that "those pieces *must* be performed in Spanish." Casas, 14, 75, emphasis in original. [↗](#)
53. Ibid., 125. [↗](#)
54. Ibid., 127. [↗](#)
55. Ibid., 128. [↗](#)
56. Ibid. [↗](#)
57. David Román, *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 6. [↗](#)
58. Casas, personal communication. [↗](#)
59. Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 45. [↗](#)
60. Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 11. [↗](#)

[Bio](#)

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